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We Chinese

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By M. Scott Brauer

"We Chinese" grew out of a curiosity to find out what Chinese people think about their country and their future. Media coverage of the country and its development often raises questions about the direction of the government in Beijing on the world stage. Few reports take into account the feelings of the Chinese people, instead making reference to the country as a monolithic actor without constituent parts. A country's trajectory through history cannot be mapped without careful consideration of the people. This project aims, in a small way, to develop a portrait of the country by looking at the individual people that make it up.

I started the project as a way to respond to questions from friends, family, and strangers about the global direction of China and their stereotypes of the people. *Should we be scared of China?* or *Where is China headed?* or broad assertions about the collective character of over a billion individuals who make up the country. The project aims to give faces and voices to a small section of the Chinese people caught in the center of historic shifts in the country's socioeconomic circumstances. Recent years in China have been marked by mass migration toward urban centers, substantial increases in personal wealth, radical changes in the country's educational and industrial sectors, and the start of China's role as a global leader in political and economic matters. Ordinary people, the subject of We Chinese, are caught in the middle of this unprecedented change. While the big story is this change itself, an important and often-overlooked aspect of modern China is what this cultural transformation means to the people and their future.

In 2010, I traveled throughout major urban centers in eastern China stopping people on the street to ask the same two questions about their country and their future. The respondents filled out a one-page typewritten questionnaire that included these two questions and some basic information including name, age, and occupation. The questions were interpreted variously, and the responses range from prosaic to poetic, from rote to inspired, and from unemotional to patriotic. While it's difficult to draw conclusions about the entire population, the people photographed here expressed a sincere love of country and optimism about the country's future development and peaceful position in the world.

The name *We Chinese* comes from a phrase I encountered time and again when talking with Chinese people in China, both in Mandarin and English. Answers to questions about the person's opinion about something or other would often begin with *We Chinese* (我□中国人 *Women Zhongguo ren*), instead of beginning with something like *I think*.

The project also comes from suspicions of my own methods in documentary work. My work imposes visual and written narratives on situations and cultures. By photographing anyone willing to be a part of the project, using the same set up for the portraits, and asking the same questions of all the subjects, I hope a narrative about China and its people would naturally emerge.

The final project comprises 100 portraits and short interviews. The text and pictures are meant to be viewed simultaneously. More pictures can be seen at the [We Chinese site](#). The work has not previously been published, beyond on the website and blogs. Word of mouth has been tremendous, but I'm still looking for exhibition and publication opportunities for the project.

M. Scott Brauer is a photojournalist based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His work can be seen at his [personal website](#) and, along with Matt Lutton, he founded [dvafoto.com](#), a blog about photojournalism.

Translations by Heidi Wickersham, [Three Rivers Language](#)



NAME: Shen Yin Ying 沈□□

AGE: 23

OCCUPATION: Clothing assistant 服装助理

WHAT DOES CHINA MEAN TO YOU?:

To me China is just a big family. The place where I was born and raised. I owe everything to my homeland.

□我来□中国就是一个大家庭。生我养我的地方。我的一切都来自于我的祖国。

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN CHINA'S FUTURE?:

Put in more of an effort in support of my country's development of clothing.

□我国的服装□展出一份力量吧！



NAME: Bo Wei Jun 播□□

AGE: 36

OCCUPATION: Engineer 工程□

WHAT DOES CHINA MEAN TO YOU?:

China is just the name of a country.

中国就是一个国度的名称。

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN CHINA'S FUTURE?:

A builder. Occasionally the people bring up suggestions, but nobody listens.

建□者，偶□众提建□，但是没有人听。



NAME: Rui Ling Yan 芮凌燕

AGE: 21

OCCUPATION: Student 学生

WHAT DOES CHINA MEAN TO YOU?:

China is my ancestral country mother. It's what I hold most dear.

中国只我地祖国母。是我最[。。。]的。

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN CHINA'S FUTURE?:

A "voiceless" person has no way of offering society even the smallest contribution.

一名'默'人无用社会做微小献的公民。



NAME: Cen Qi 岑琪

AGE: 24

OCCUPATION: Student 学生

WHAT DOES CHINA MEAN TO YOU?:

China includes Taiwan, where Chinese people reside, and it is the abbreviation of the People's Republic of China.

中国就是包括台湾在内中国民族长期居住的地方，也是中国人民共和国的简称。

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN CHINA'S FUTURE?:

I am a builder of China's future, just like a component of an airplane, and with me China will soar even farther in the future.

在中国的未来中，我将是个中国发展的建造者，就像是飞机有的一个零件有了我使中国的未来飞的更高。



NAME: Ma Guan Guan 马官官

AGE: 54

OCCUPATION: Remodeler 装修

WHAT DOES CHINA MEAN TO YOU?:

China is our home. It is the family spring from which I started my life journey.

中国是我家的家园。家征着的泉。

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN CHINA'S FUTURE?:

A Chinese citizen.

中国公民



NAME: Zhang Zheng Ya 张雅

AGE: 24

OCCUPATION: Independent clothing seller 服装自由

WHAT DOES CHINA MEAN TO YOU?:

To me the word China is like a mother. It provides for you. It doesn't ask you to give anything back. We are proud to have a "mother" like this. Self-pride.

对我来说中国就像一个母亲。养育我。不求回报。我拥有“母亲”而骄傲。自豪。

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN CHINA'S FUTURE?:

We should believe that we will grasp our role in the future, work hard, and generously think of ways to support our country.

我自信地掌握自己在未来的主角。努力。大方的去祝自己就想反国！



NAME: Wang Bao Ning 王宝宁

AGE: 20

OCCUPATION: Free [working as a building security guard] 自由

WHAT DOES CHINA MEAN TO YOU?:

It stands for a unified China at this stage realizing hopes to be the master of its own affairs into the future.

代表着国家统一，今之完整希望，久当家作主。

WHAT IS YOUR ROLE IN CHINA'S FUTURE?:

I haven't really thought about it at this point, we'll see, depends on motivation.

目前未想好，以后在，看一后努力。

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